

POOR LEGIBILITY

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Hot spot: Shamont Marshall, Jamil Shelton, Unique Marshall, and Damontay Marshall (from left) play near hazardous-waste warning signs at the proposed site of South Prescott Park.

Poison park

Caltrans wants to build a playground on a toxic site. Neighbors want to stop it.

By A. Clay Thompson

THE PROBLEM IS NOT the playground, West Oaklanders want that. After all, the area is sorely lacking in decent places for children to romp.

The problem is that the soil at the proposed park is laden with toxic refuse. And some residents of this tough, predominantly African American and Latino neighborhood say the state agency that wants to build it is putting their health at risk.

The weedy lot between Third Street and the train tracks, running east-west from Mandela Parkway to Peralta Street, is owned by Caltrans, which offered to build the park years ago when West Oaklanders threatened to stop the reconstruction of the Cypress Freeway. A hazardous-waste sign warns away passers-by.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency issued a letter June 16

urging the state to address neighborhood concerns. Staffers for U.S. congressional representative Barbara Lee (D-Oakland), state assemblymember Audie Bock (G-Piedmont), and Oakland City Council member Nancy Nadel have also gotten involved.

Lead is the major contaminant in the five acres that will one day become South Prescott Park; chemical solvents, ammonia, chlordane, and

PCBs also lurk beneath the surface. What else is buried on the site—once home to Bobo's Junkyard and Best Fertilizer—is anybody's guess. Vinyl chloride pollutes the groundwater nearby and may be pooling under the lot.

Lead exposure in even minute amounts can cause brain damage in children; none of the substances are exactly kid-friendly.

Renee Morrison is worried about the health of her five-year-old son and her nieces and nephews. "Our children's lives are in jeopardy here," Morrison, who heads the Chester Street Block Club Association, said. "I want to make sure this is a good cleanup deal. We're looking out for the children, babies, the pregnant women."

"Caltrans isn't going to do anything that's going to harm the neigh-

bors or the neighborhood," Caltrans spokesperson Stephen Williams told us. "All of the concerns they've raised have been addressed. It's obvious that we want to be good neighbors."

Caltrans, with the blessing of the state Department of Toxic Substances Control, plans to dig out the lot to a depth of at least a foot, then truck in new soil. The agency wanted to decontaminate the soil below to a lead level of 840 parts per million. Public pressure forced the highway department to lower the average lead level to 400 ppm, with a cap of 600 ppm.

"Average background levels in soil would be ten, twenty ppm," environmental justice org. Greenaction's Bradley Angel told us. "The U.S. EPA's standards for residential cleanup are four hundred ppm."

Even subsurface lead levels are a

problem, Angel says, "because of migration—because of groundwater potentially making the lead mobile and bringing it closer to the surface."

But that's not the only issue. Nearby neighbors fear that the excavation and remediation process will expose them to toxic dust and debris. Five houses abut the site, and some people who dwell close to the lot are asking for the option of relocating while the chemical witch's brew is brought to the surface.

The federal EPA is backing that request. "We also recommend providing temporary relocation to nearby residents," EPA Superfund director Keith Takata wrote in a letter to the state toxics department. "We believe this is appropriate as an added measure of protection from potential exposure to airborne dust containing contaminants."

Caltrans's Williams told the *Bay Guardian* the department has no plans to relocate residents before digging begins. Frank Simpson of the toxics department said relocation issues lie beyond his office's purview.

Community members and enviros are also calling for a complete chemical analysis of the spot before work begins. "They want to go ahead without knowing everything they need to know about the site," Greenaction's Angel charges. "There are still very serious questions about the vinyl chloride contamination. This project has the potential to come back and one day haunt [Caltrans]."

On June 17, the day before Caltrans was to commence excavation, angry neighbors halted the cleanup process. That evening, at a reportedly raucous meeting with state officials, Morrison and others convinced the agency to delay work until community concerns were alleviated.

Staffers for Bock set up a follow-up meeting for July 1 at her Oakland office. Reps for the state toxics department, Nadel, Lee, Greenaction, the Chester Street association, and, naturally, Bock herself, all turned up. Caltrans didn't.

"We were disappointed," said Carlos Plazola, an assistant to Lee who attended the session. Nadel is expected to present the highway department with a list of recommendations agreed on at the meeting.

"It's OK if they want to be disappointed," Caltrans's Williams told us. "But we've had a number of meetings, and Caltrans is ready to begin work. Every meeting means a delay, and every delay costs money. The bottom line is that we're trying to clean this shit up." ■

Oakland's toxic park

IT'S A SAD DAY when West Oakland residents have to oppose the construction of a playground in their neighborhood. After all, this largely industrial neighborhood could use a lot more green, public places for kids.

But as A. Clay Thompson reports on page 13, Caltrans insists on building the South Prescott Park playground on top of a hazardous waste site—despite the opposition of the families who would theoretically enjoy the park.

Neighbors have organized to ensure that, if Caltrans goes ahead with its plan, it decontaminates the park thoroughly. And they don't want

to be next to the site while construction kicks up clouds of toxic dust.

The federal Environmental Protection Agency thinks that's a valid concern. The EPA's Superfund director has urged Caltrans to heed neighborhood concerns and to temporarily relocate residents before digging up the site.

Oakland's elected representatives, in City Hall, in Sacramento, and in Washington, shouldn't be content with that. They should also call on Caltrans to abide by strict standards for the cleanup and to ensure that neighbors get relocated—before the bulldozers start chewing up toxic soil. ■